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ABSTRACT

This booklet, one in a series about life on modern farms, describes the daily life of two black farm families, the Minisees of Michigan and the Sims brothers of Arkansas. Beginning with early morning chores, the booklet describes some of the chores they do in running their diversified farms and how they got started in farming. Although the booklet focuses on black farmers, it includes discussion of major topics that are common to all of the booklets: (1) farming as a business, (2) the impact of technology on farming, (3) the increasing specialization in farming, (4) the role of government in agriculture, (5) the diversity in farming, (6) the interdependence between agriculture and the rest of the economy, and (7) the way of life of farmers and their families. The booklet is illustrated with black and white photographs. (KC)

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PEOPLE ON THE FARM: BLACK FAMILIES

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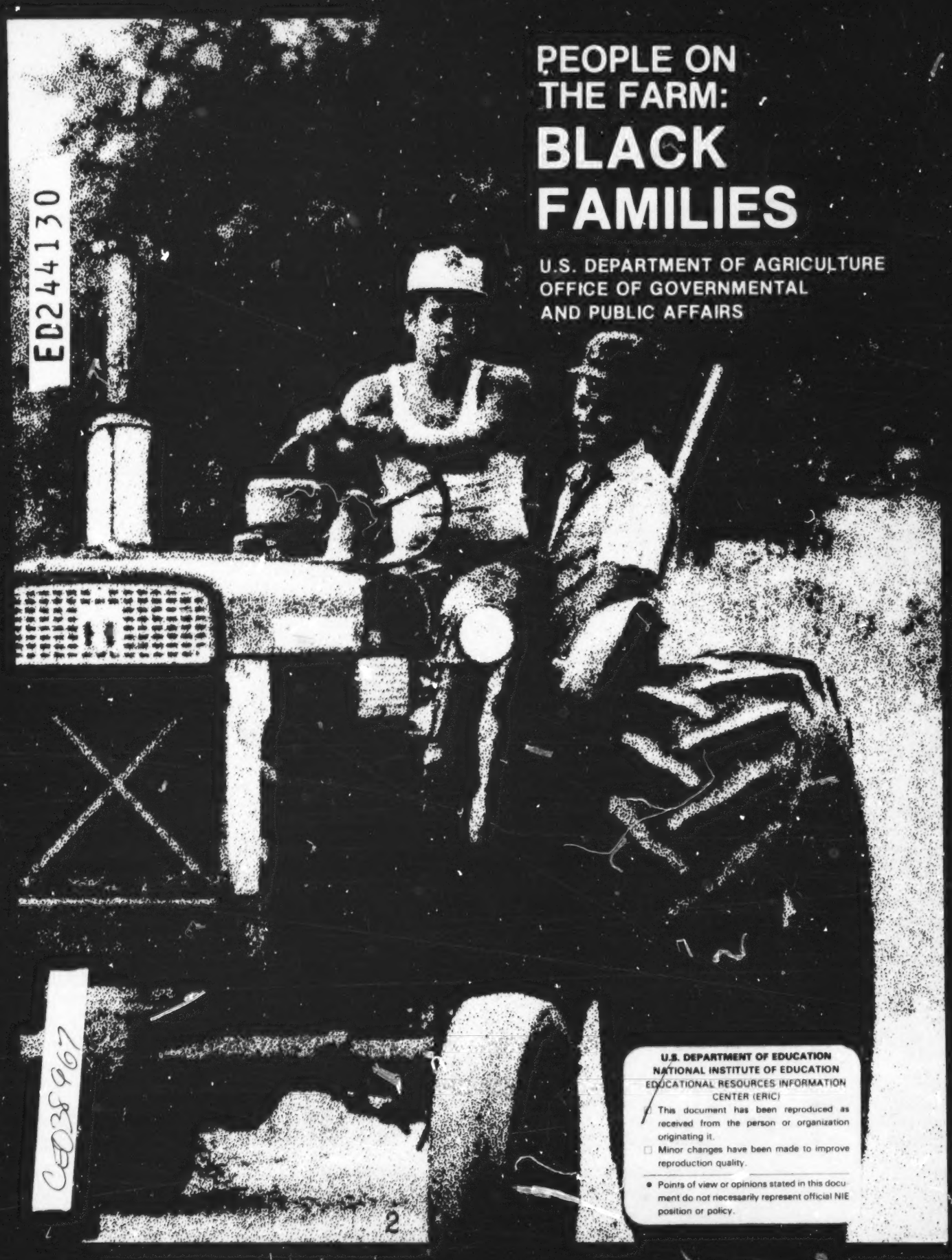

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INTRODUCTION

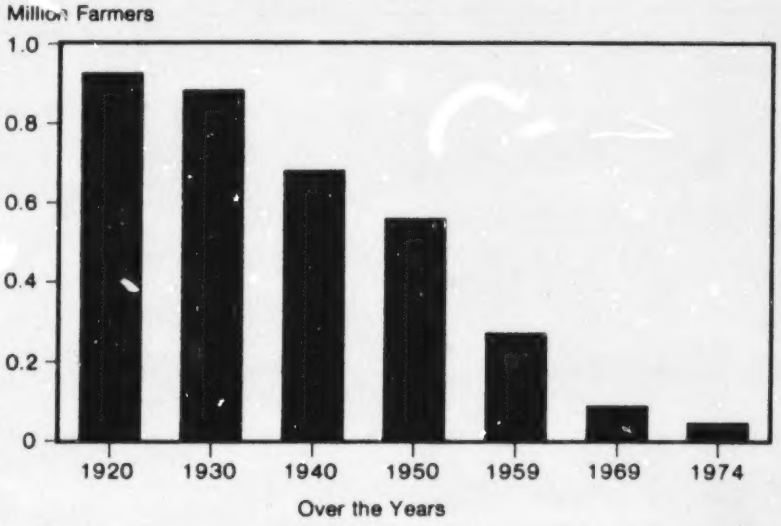
From nearly a million black farmers in the United States in 1920 to 45,594 in 1974—that's quite a drop. At the same time, the total number of farms in the U.S. was dropping from 6½ million to 2.3 million.

Probably more than half of the 925,710 black farmers counted in 1920 were tenant farmers, and a good portion of these functioned as farm laborers who were paid with a share of the crop they raised. Today's black farmer is much more likely to own all or part of the farm he operates. In 1974, nearly nine out of ten black farmers owned part or all of the farm they operated, up from eight out of ten just five years earlier.

Half of the loss occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, when cotton farming was revolutionized by machines and chemicals, and rural black people flooded to the cities. In 1920, when the number of black farmers peaked, one out of every six farmers in this country was black. In 1974, one farmer in every 50 was black.

Nearly two-thirds of all black farmers sell less than $2,500 worth of farm goods a year. That group receives off-farm income, probably from a job in town. This booklet describes brief visits to four farmers with higher farm income: Wilbur and Robert Minisee of Cass County, Michigan, and John and Henry Sims, of Drew County, Arkansas.

Black Farmers in America



PEOPLE ON THE FARM:

BLACK FAMILIES

The Minisees of Michigan

One of the youngest of Michigan's 132 black farmers, Wilbur Minisee, was trying to play agricultural "catch up" in the summer of 1978. For three seasons—the previous fall, winter, and spring—wet weather had kept him out of the fields where his work was needed.

Only 25, Wilbur had been farming 10 years, and he'd never seen weather difficulties compounded like this. Through the previous fall, he fidgeted beside idled harvesting machines, watching for weeks in frustration as more and more fields full of grain-filled corn and soybean plants dissolved into muddy seas. Any wheel of a harvesting machine that broke those rippling surfaces would stick fast in minutes.

For all practical purposes, Wilbur had lost both corn and soybean crops in 1977 . . . crops that represented tens of thousands of dollars in potential income. Stakes are high when you plant crops on 600 acres and then try to harvest them. In 1977 Wilbur lost the gamble.

Worse, Wilbur still wasn't out of trouble by the first day of summer in 1978. Again, rain held him back—this time from harvesting what was left of the previous fall's crop. The rain not only slowed the harvest, but the plowing and the disking of the soil as well—steps needed to prepare the soil for planting. Finally, it delayed the planting of the 1978 crops.

By the first day of summer, Wilbur had all the corn planted, but it was planted later than he liked. And he still didn't have all his soybeans planted. He'd never planted beans this late. How would the late planting affect his crop? Each crop needs enough good growing days to mature. Wilbur was threatened with a cutback in production for the second year in a row.

The thought could have been depressing. " 'Catch up' is an impossible game on the farm," he admitted. Yet Wilbur remained optimistic. The last 10 years had been good to him. He remembered that first year, going $300 in debt when he was only 15 years old. With an old tractor, an old cultivator, and an old planter which he had bought, he planted his first 10 acres of corn. His dad arranged the $300 loan at the bank and Wilbur paid it back, $40 a month, with money he earned making hay for others and work-

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Rakes that farmers use look like huge reel-type lawn mowers with steel fingers instead of blades. The reels run backward while the wheels run forward, so that cut hay or straw is picked up gently and piled in a row. The rake that frames Robert Minisee, Wilbur's brother, above, will be used to rake wheat straw on land that Wilbur rents. The field, a small one, yielded 20 bales of straw. Wilbur sold them for $25. Earlier he had harvested $90 worth of wheat from the same field.

ing on the campgrounds of the nearby Seventh Day Adventist Church. Wilbur smiled. "I made more money that year than I did in 1977," he said.

EXPANSION WAS STEADY

From that year forward, Wilbur expanded his farm operation regularly—renting more and more land, buying more and more equipment, trading old machines for newer (used) models, paying off old debts and acquiring new ones.

In 1972, he was so busy planting 140 acres of corn that he couldn't go with his high school's senior class to Florida.

The year after his graduation, Wilbur planted 240 acres of corn, soybeans, oats, and hay, and held down a full-time job at a grocery store in nearby Niles at the same time.

In 1974, Wilbur quit his job at the store and went into farming full time. He planted and harvested 300 rented acres. The next year he rented and worked 400 acres. Finally, in 1976, Wilbur reached the 600-acre level. "And that's where it's going to stay for awhile" he said in 1978.

It takes the income from 600 acres for Wilbur to make the payments on his machinery. Five hundred acres wouldn't be adequate, he said.

Years like 1977 don't help Wilbur. Yet, farmers are gamblers and Wilbur is a farmer. Looking around optimistically in June, he saw drying fields and growing corn rather than weeks of rain, muddy fields, and unplanted soybeans. He saw a "farm" of 600 acres, not scattered pieces of land of from 10 to 20 and more acres as far as 30 miles apart. He hadn't inherited a farm, but he was in roughly the same position as other young farmers, white or black, who were struggling to get a start in farming.

It was not "his" land. He rented it all. Furthermore, some of this land was low, so that water accumulated there in rainy seasons. But optimistic Wilbur could see that in dry seasons, low areas gathered much-needed moisture for his crops.

Wilbur has farmed about the only way really open to a young person starting with nothing. He rents land, buys used equipment, learns farming from practical experience, and simultaneously throws himself on the mercy of the weather and understanding lenders.

It takes him 5 to 20 minutes to drive to any of the various fields that he rents. He plants corn and soybeans, harvests hay that others usually have planted, and feeds a few young cattle.

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Wilbur Minisee pauses to chat with Stephen Eddy, architect for the home in the background which is a rebuilt barn. Fifty-five acres in this section that Wilbur rents has been divided into 10-acre "mini-farms." Homes are built where Wilbur used to grow hay and corn but Wilbur continues to work the adjacent land. Each year, a million acres of America's prime farmland is urbanized.

In 1978, he planted 260 acres to corn and 120 acres to soybeans. He mowed and baled hay from another 260 acres. He fed 37 dairy calves that he bought from neighbors and planned to sell some as feeder calves to feedlot operators and others as fed steers (castrated males) at nearby auctions.

SUMMER BEGINS

On the first day of summer in 1978, Wilbur was encouraged when he learned that Mike Yaw, his neighbor, had just recovered from an illness and was ready to help him with his planting. Mike and Wilbur helped each other a lot. It didn't matter that Mike was white and Wilbur was black.

Today, Wilbur and Mike poured bags full of seed soybeans into the cannisters of Mike's six-row planter. Then Wilbur walked swiftly to his pickup and drove it to a hayfield 6 miles away, where his younger brother Alfred was cutting alfalfa. He couldn't resist murmuring a soft "praises, praises," as he drove. Maybe, just maybe, Wilbur said, he could catch up on his field work during the next few days.

Not that his troubles were over. Wilbur was late in cutting hay that year because of the rain and all the other necessary field work; so the crop was getting older and tougher than Wilbur wanted it to get. He would get less money for the crop at the market.

Wilbur was thinking out loud as he drove. "If I can only get the anhydrous (ammonia, a fertilizer for his corn) in by the Fourth of July," he said, "I believe I'll have it made."

Wilbur's optimism was irrepressible. After noting that the hay in his rented field was being cut as well as its toughness would permit, Wilbur returned to his pickup deep in thought. As he drove to his modest rented home alongside M-60, west of Cassopolis, he contemplated the work that might be accomplished during the rest of the day and week. Wilbur was convinced it would be a good day.

Ramona, his wife, fixed lunch for him before she drove to college classes. Their son, 18-month-old Wilbur, was staying at his grandmother's—Wilbur's mother—a quarter mile down the road.

FEW YOUNG BLACK FARMERS

Wilbur is rare. In 1974, when Wilbur was 21, he was part of the exclusive 1 percent of the nonwhite farmers in the United States who were under 25. Furthermore, he was one of only 2,000 black farmers who didn't live in the South.

Wilbur is more successful at farming than most blacks. A typical black farmer today—if there is such a person—would probably farm less than 140 acres. People who operate that size farm—black or white—depend on some kind of off-farm income for survival, or they are retired persons. Even farm families who sell $40,000 to $100,000 worth of farm products a year still earn a fourth of their total income off the farm.

Wilbur's overall income in 1977 was $57,100. Yet, no matter how you look at it, he lost money that year. His operating expenses totaled $53,869, his debts cost him $18,620, and family living expenses amounted to $13,000.

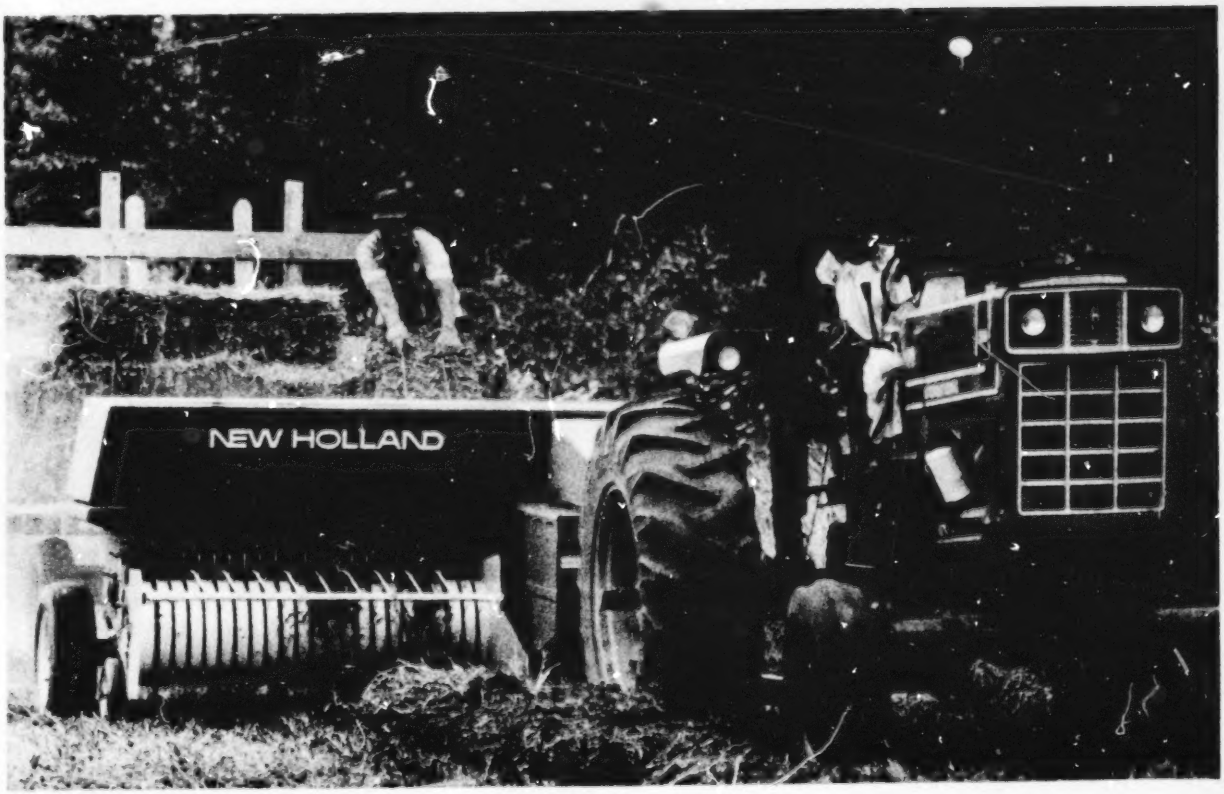
How did Wilbur make up the difference between cash outflow and cash coming in? He drew money out of the bank—money he had hoped to use as a down payment toward some land of his own. And he borrowed $33,000 from the Farmers Home Administration as a disaster loan to be repaid over the next 8 years.

If 1978 turned out as disastrously as 1977, Wilbur could be forced to go to work for some other farmer, to get a job in a factory, or both.

Wilbur, they say, is in the "front lines" of agriculture. What is he doing out there, anyway?

"I really enjoy farming," he said.

Ramona Minisee, Wilbur's wife, is an important cog in the farm operation. She earns money for college studies driving the tractor which pulls the hay baler and the wagon which carries the bales. Wilbur's job is to stack the 50-pound bales as they come out of the baler. At the barn, one of five that Wilbur rents for storage, the bales will be stacked again.



"I enjoy every phase of it. It's a business challenge . . . acquiring capital, managing capital, managing labor to get the job done. Last fall put me in a terrible bind. I enjoy the challenge of finding a way out. Also, people say you can't become a farmer unless a farm is given to you or you marry one. I want to prove I can do it."

Certainly, Wilbur isn't in line to inherit a farm, and he didn't "marry one." His father, Darwin, once owned a 120-acre farm just down the road, but he had to sell it in 1960 to pay off his debts. (Now a coast-to-coast hauler of trailer homes. Darwin says he still doesn't know whether the government loan officer who turned him down for that critical loan in 1960 did him a favor or not. It wasn't easy for a black farmer to borrow money in 1960, Darwin says). As for his wife inheriting a farm, well, Ramona is the daughter of a laborer and of a nurse, a couple who moved to rural Michigan from Chicago in the 1970's. Ramona's dad, George Moses, now works for Wilbur and drives a school bus as well.

There have been blacks farming in southwestern Michigan since the Civil War because of the underground railroad, an unofficial system of helping slaves escape to the North. In one community near the Minisees, there is a plaque commemorating the help given escaped slaves by the Friends (Quakers). So it was natural that the Minisees and the Moses family should meet there.

TAUGHT HOW TO WORK

Darwin Minisee may not have left his son a farm, but he taught him the importance of work. He took his son to the hayfields to watch when Wilbur was only 5 years old. At 9, Wilbur started picking strawberries, an annual job that he held until he was 13.

When he was 13, Wilbur started working for a dairy farmer who owned 10,000 chickens. At first Wilbur collected eggs from the nests. Then he started helping with the cows and mowing hay.

Robert Minisee, left, and his brother, Wilbur, right, grease a hay mower while their father, Darwin, looks on. Wilbur lives only a quarter mile from the home of his father, mother and brothers, where he stores some corn and machinery and refuels his vehicles. Darwin, who once owned a farm then sold it, now drives trailers from coast to coast. He was en route from Pennsylvania to South Bend but found time to visit.

Wilbur will never forget the summer he was 14. That was the year his arm was seized by a feed auger and badly mauled. A feed auger is a big long screw that carries grain from a truck to a storage bin. Generally it is covered with metal, but it will snatch anything that accidentally touches the twirling screw—such as a shirt sleeve. Wilbur was able to turn off the machine after his arm was caught. It was hours before others were able to free him and take him to a skillful surgeon, but his arm was saved.

The following year, Wilbur planted, cared for and harvested his first 10 acres of corn—although he also continued to work on the dairy farm.

Like all struggling young farmers, Wilbur wants very much to own some land, but his dad warns him against paying to much for it. "If you can't sell your crop for more than the taxes and the interest on the land you bought," his dad said, "then you're in trouble."

Sitting in his kitchen, waiting to haul a Pennsylvania trailer to nearby South Bend, Darwin commented: "Farming is a wonderful life. The only thing is, they (Wilbur and his brother Robert) might get in deeper than they can get out. They're getting up to where they aren't playing with small money. Wilbur's in debt to $100,000. It'll take 8 years to pay that off. It's hard. It takes a lot of hard work."

Robert, who is 23 and rents 200 nearby acres of his own, found he couldn't make enough money farming to meet expenses. His creditors were getting concerned, he said, so he signed up for a 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. job in a trailer factory in Elkhart, Ind., to pay off his debts. Robert considers this only a temporary setback from his goal to be a farmer.

He and Wilbur work in concert in the fields, though not as legal partners, and often not side by

side. It was like that on the first day of the summer of 1978:

Robert prepared the fields for planting until dark . . . dragging the steel teeth of a springtooth harrow over the plowed sandy loam to break up the soil into smaller pieces and level it. The next day he would help others in the family make hay.

Behind Robert, Wilbur and Mike planted the tardy soybeans. Mike worked only until 3:30 p.m., when he had to stop to milk his cows. Wilbur kept going until 10 p.m. The next day, Wilbur finished planting soybeans and then knifed anhydrous ammonia into 30 acres of corn.

On Saturday, observed as Sabbath by the Minisees, there would be no work done. "We don't plant or plow or anything on Saturday," Wilbur said. "We haven't had any disastrous experiences."

The church is the center of Wilbur's and Ramona's social life. They met at a church social in 1971 and were married in 1976. Since they are Seventh Day Adventists, all of their activities from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday are church oriented. Saturday evening they often spend with friends, talking politics and religion, Wilbur's two favorite subjects.

Sometimes they'll eat at a restaurant in one of the small towns nearby. "It's rough if you can't even enjoy a meal out," his father commented. "Wilbur does do that, and I'm glad to see it." Then in a lower voice, Darwin added, "Even if he can't afford it."

Like most cash grain farmers, Wilbur sells some of his corn and soybeans a long time before harvest—at least enough of the crop to cover the expense of growing it. He sells more at harvest time, and stores some for later, hoping that prices will rise. He stores and sells hay throughout the winter at nearby hay auctions, notably in northern Indiana where Amish farmers like to buy it for their horses.

THE WAY IT IS

Between 1970 and 1975, the number of blacks on farms decreased by 40 percent (the white rate of loss was 11 percent).*

There were 401,000 blacks on farms in 1975—nearly a third of these being hired farm laborers and their families. Nearly all of them (95 percent) lived in the South.

Most blacks in the farm population, as with whites, live on either cash-grain farms or livestock farms. If a farm gets most of its income from growing wheat, corn, grain sorghum, or soybeans, it is a cash-grain farm. Livestock farms can be either beef cattle farms, hog farms, or both.

After livestock and cash-grain farms, farm blacks are most likely to be found on tobacco farms or cotton farms. Just 2 years earlier, most blacks were on tobacco farms.

Less than half of 1 percent of all persons living on dairy farms are black. There are only about 800 black-operated dairy farms in the entire United States.

Nearly half the blacks who live on farms live on farms that sell less than $2,500 worth of farm products a year. Nearly all of such blacks are members of the farm operators' families.

Some 57,000 blacks live on farms that sell more than $100,000 worth of farm products a year. But all but 1,000 of them are hired workers and their families.

In 1975, of blacks who actually ran farms, almost 90 percent of them lived on farms that sold less than $10,000 worth of farm products.

***This short article describes the numbers of *people* on farms, not just the number of *farmers*.**

MUST MANAGE WELL

Activity in the Minisee operation can get pretty hectic as it did after the wet spring of 1978, for instance; and Wilbur must manage his time and that of his helpers with great skill.

He's always thinking ahead. During the mind-numbing boredom of plowing, for instance, Wilbur is planning the rest of his day, the rest of his week, and the rest of the year.

Sometimes, though, his mind turns to other subjects. One hot windy day toward the end of July, Wilbur was cutting hay on the edge of a new residential development (subdividers were building a little suburbia of ranch-style homes on the land he rented). Wilbur was pulling a mower behind his tractor, jumping off the machine about every 5 minutes to unclog the machine. All of the tractor-seat time, he was thinking about what to tell his fellow church members Wednesday night when he led the prayer meeting. He planned to talk about "faith and Nebuchadnezzar and those three boys who stood in the fire for defying the king's orders." Faith—that would be his subject, as well as his lifestyle. "Sometimes I think I'd be a preacher if I weren't a farmer," he said.

In the winter, Wilbur and Ramona hoped to visit his grandparents in Pasadena, California for 3 weeks. That would be sometime when Ramona wasn't in school. Backed by scholarships, grants, and the money she earns working beside her husband in the hayfields, Ramona is studying to be an audiologist (a hearing specialist) at nearby Andrews University. She hopes ultimately to become an instructor at Andrews.

Farm wives all across the country are working off the farm to help meet family living expenses and for personal satisfaction. It is more than the prospect of income which attracts Ramona. "A woman needs to be able to do something when the kids grow up and move out," she explained. "Wilbur likes farming. And I like it as long as I can do what I want to do. I can do what I want to except on those days when he says, 'Stay home, I need you.' I'd love to stay home

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and help him more. But I've got to do this thing first."

Wilbur didn't attend college. In 1972, when he graduated from high school, Wilbur recalled, "I wanted to be making $10,000 a year by 1976. I couldn't do that going to college." He thought he could reach that goal through farming.

THINKING AHEAD

What does the future hold for Wilbur Minisee, his wife Ramona, and their son, Little Wilbur? Wilbur's long-term goal is to assemble 2,000 acres to work—some of them that he will rent, and some that he will own. About 1,500 of them will be planted to corn and soybeans; the rest will be in hay.

In the shorter term, Wilbur has his eye on 112 acres nearby that might become available for him to buy. Most farmers own some land as a base from which to operate. They rent varying amounts over and above that.

Another immediate goal for him, Wilbur said, is to become a better manager—"to be planting when I should be planting, and harvesting when I should be harvesting." That would be a natural reaction following the wet fall of 1977 and the wet spring of 1978.

Despite the year's beginning, however, Wilbur's farm operation looked better after the harvest in the fall. His corn fields yielded about 21,000 bushels of grain, and his soybean fields another 3,000 bushels of beans, raising the prospect of his grossing about $60,000 from the sale of these crops (although all would not be sold in 1978.)

Wilbur also harvested 27,000 regular-sized (50 pounds) bales of hay and 160 of the big round variety, which weigh 900 to 1,200 pounds each. That would bring him about $25,000 eventually though not all in one calendar year. So Wilbur fared a lot better with his crops in 1978 than he did in 1977.

He was also feeding 38 young cattle for which he paid about $50 apiece and which he would sell the next year, either in March as feeders (for someone else to fatten and market) or as fed cattle in late summer.

So when Wilbur said "Catch Up is impossible on the farm," he was only partly right.

In the years ahead, there would be many days when Wilbur would get discouraged. Some days, he said, he "feels like chucking it all in and going to the city."

Wilbur described what kind of day that would be:

"The kind of day when you have two rear tractor flats, your brother busts the plow and you send a guy to disk and he comes back in 2 hours and says 'where?' Or the baler breaks and a bearing goes out in the corn picker and you buy $200 worth of parts that you can carry in one hand."

Wilbur smiles at the uncertainty of his future.

"Come back in 10 years," he said, "and I'll tell you how I came out."

Little Wilbur is as explosive as a broken field runner at 18 months of age and wants to follow his father everywhere. Wilbur finds time to play with him often during the day. Ramona usually prepares lunch for Wilbur before leaving for college classes. Wilbur's mother looks after Little Wilbur when Ramona is away.

Awakened from his nap by a knock on the door, Little Wilbur is ready instantly to dig at the day's activities with a big shovel. Like most farm youngsters, he'll be ready to take on his share of the farm work when his time comes.

Wilbur and Ramona's Income and Expenses, 1978

Income		Expenses	
Cattle sales	$ 4,307	Hired labor	$ 2,300
*Crop sales	46,965	Repair machinery	4,876
Hay sales	17,172	Interest	9,839
Custom work	2,724	Rent	17,745
Miscellaneous	5,550	Seed	5,057
TOTAL	$76,718	Fertilizer	13,672
		Fuel oil, gas	6,302
		Insurance	625
Expenses	$69,286	Chemicals	3,732
+Debt Repayment	25,168	Miscellaneous	5,138
	$94,454	TOTAL	$69,286
−Income	76,718		
Net Loss	$17,736		

*A part of the crop sold in 1978 was sold the next year.

Tires seem most likely to go flat when the wagon is loaded with straw. Farmers patch their own tires and fix most other things to save time and money. Straw will be used as bedding for calves that Wilbur feeds.

Wilbur looks forward to buying some land of his own. But the prices he gets for his corn, soybeans, hay and cattle must produce enought income to pay for that land. The price of farmland keeps rising—14 percent nationally in 1978, about the average per year since 1972. In Michigan, the increase was 11 percent in 1978.

"Farming is something you've got to be born to like," Wilbur says. In the quiet that settles when he turns off his tractor, Wilbur can hear a dog barking on the next farm, the muffled sound of another machine working over the hill, and the sudden clear whistle of Bob White quails. Then the work doesn't seem so hard.

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WHY DID BLACKS LEAVE THE FARM?

There were nearly a million black farmers—926,000—in the U.S. in 1920. There were only 45,594 in 1974. What happened?

Well, first—probably more than half of those 926,000 black farmers were tenant farmers. They didn't own any land. Their wages were what they could get from the sale of a specified portion of the crops they planted, cared for, and harvested by hand. That left them nearly defenseless against the agricultural revolution of the 20th century. There were many whites in the same predicament but not in the same proportions.

Basically, there were two kinds of tenant farmers (of any race): those who had control over what was planted on the land and when it was sold, and those who did not. Those who did not were little more than farm laborers whose employment was governed by the landowners. They were called sharecroppers.

Sharecroppers borrowed the supplies they needed for a year from a landowner or a merchant, and then paid for it when the crop was sold. Often the poor sharecropper never got out of debt because of high rates of interest, overpriced goods, illiteracy, and sharp practices.

When cotton farming ran into trouble in the South, so did the lives of thousands of black sharecroppers. First, the boll weevil, an insect which destroys cotton on the plant, swept through the South, heavily damaging millions of acres of cotton every year. As defeated landlords turned to dairying and the raising of livestock, the back-breaking work of thousands of blacks became more and more unnecessary, and the landless tenant farmers—both black and white—were forced into the cities looking for jobs.

The erosion and depletion of good farmland in Georgia and South Carolina had a similar effect. Though chemicals finally helped control the boll weevil, agriculture was never the same in the South.

Then, during and after World War II, mechanization revolutionized cotton growing. First, tractors replaced the mules owned or cared for by poor farmers. Then, multirow cotton pickers and chemical weed killers delivered the final blows. Each change reduced the need for human labor.

Other forces were at work. Good paying factory jobs drew poor farmers to the city. Farmers who stayed behind felt compelled to mechanize for lack of manpower, so the emigration gained momentum.

Morehouse Parish extension agent John Andrews of Louisiana recalls the sharecroppers "chopping" cotton with hoes and by hand before the advent of herbicides in the 1960's.

"There were probably 1,400 to 2,000 sharecroppers in the parish 20 years ago," Andrews said. "Today there are none. All those people have moved to Bastrop, to California, Detroit, Washington, and New York. By 1970, nearly all of the sharecropper houses had been torn down."

In 1950, only 8 percent of the cotton in the United States was picked by machine. Twenty years later, only 2 percent was NOT picked by machine.

There were other reasons. Irrigation opened up the West to cotton production—at a lower cost per bale than all but the most productive sections of the South. And the market wanted more of the long-fibered cotton grown in the West, and less of the shorter staple cotton growing in the Delta. The number of nonwhite farmers growing cotton in the South dropped 77 percent from 1945 to 1964.

Joseph Sims recalls that a lot of land near him once was owned by blacks. "They'd get sick and borrow on the land," he said. "The time would come and they couldn't pay. They'd lose their land." John Andrews said, "poor folk are more suspicious of debt than anyone else. They never gamble with the land if they own some." Still, the time came for many to borrow when they had to.

Another problem has been publicized. When the land of blacks (and others, for that matter) passes from one generation to the next, many of the heirs might agree to sell the land in order to settle the estate; and perhaps the one remaining relative who wants to work the land can't afford to buy the whole farm. Organizations have been created to ease this problem for blacks.

Also, to keep the land, "you've got to keep up . . . make sure your taxes are paid," Joseph Sims warns.

Wilbur Minisee said his dad's folks lost their farm during the Depression. His other grandfather went to work in the factories, though he had been a farmer.

Wilbur summarized:

"Why aren't there more blacks in farming? Most of them were sharecroppers and they never had enough left. They or their kids went to the cities and educated their children there. Once they cut communications to the farm, it was hard to come back. They needed capital and if they had it, they wanted to put it in something they could get a little more out of for the work they put into it

"I asked an old man once why those people who had had land down South didn't hold onto it. He said it was because they only talked about it being their land. The owner had said, you've been a good worker, so you can work such and such a piece. But the property never changed hands, even though the black was given the right to work it and would say it was his land."

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John (left), 38, and Henry Sims (right), 45, find cotton, soybean and beef cattle farming in Arkansas both profitable and enjoyable. Full partners in farming, they own a lot of equipment but very little land. Most of the land they rent belongs to their father, Joseph, who started farming for himself in 1928. John and Henry borrow about $26,000 a year to buy fertilizer and chemicals, then repay it when they sell their crops. They could rent more land but they'd have to hire more help to handle it.

The Sims Brothers of Arkansas

A measure of John Sims' success is that his sons want to grow up to be like him and his brother Henry—partners in farming in Arkansas.

Working with the land has been good for John and Henry Sims, who grow cotton and soybeans just west of the Mississippi River in Drew County. Not too long ago, they built modern brick ranch homes a quarter of a mile apart on a country road 7 miles west of Tillar. They have bought equipment worth a quarter of a million dollars. In 1978, their farming brought them $138,002 in total income and a net income after expenses of $48,478 to be divided between the two families.

By any measure, they are a success. They earn it, though, through hard work and shrewd management.

Verna, John's wife and a teacher, says, "The only thing I can complain about is the long working hours of John in the summer. I know it's necessary but he's so durn busy at times . . . like when he's really trying to get something done. He's out a little after 6 (in the morning) and done about 8:30 (at night). It's longer than that in the fall (which is harvest time)."

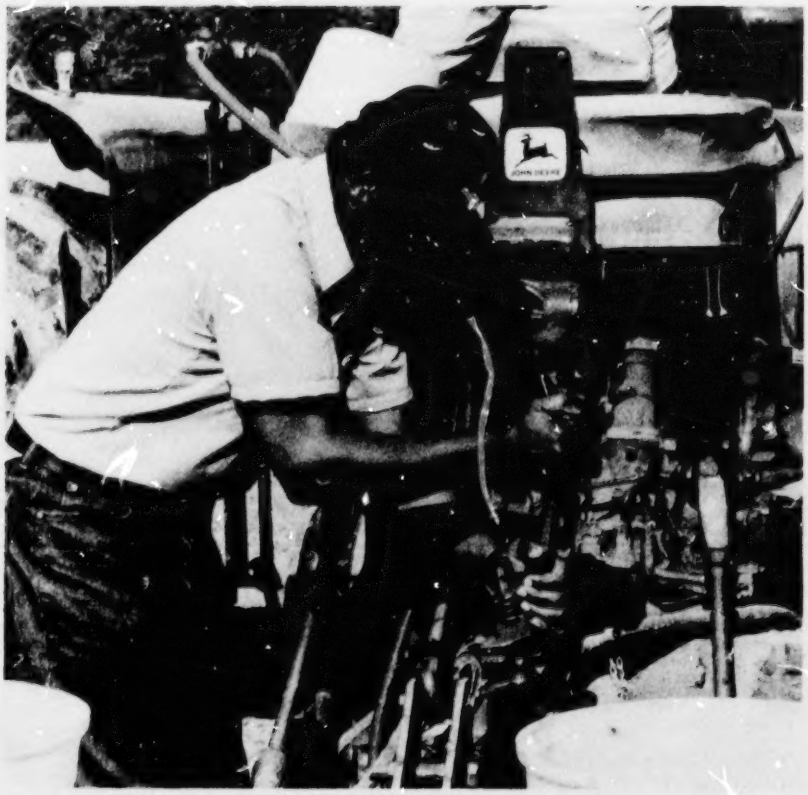
But John thinks of farm work as relaxation. A basketball player when he was in high school, he says, "It's hard work but it's a release. In the winter, I can hardly wait to get out into the fields."

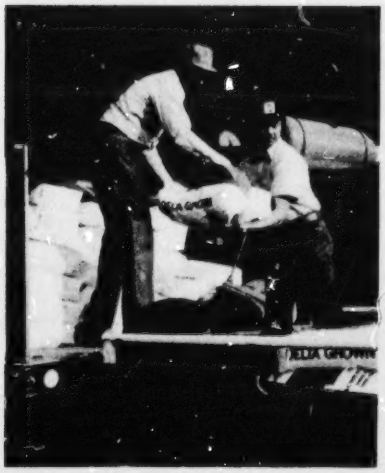
Warm, productive Drew County, endowed with good soil (some of it rich Mississippi Delta land) and lots of pasture around and between the red oaks, white oaks, and loblolly pine, has always been home to John and Henry . . . and their parents before them. This land is capable of producing a good living for those who are willing to work with it . . . and John and Henry see that it does.

Every morning about 6 o'clock, Henry and John meet at the equipment shed they built between their homes to discuss their work plan for the day. If the weather is good and they need to do some field work, they will load up their tractors with diesel fuel or butane and their pickups with gasoline, hook on the machinery they will need in the fields, and then head down the road. Arthur Butler, their helper, will be driving one of the vehicles.

Actually, John and Henry don't own the land they work. John owns the 15 acres his home is on; Henry owns the 18 acres around his home. They rent all the rest: 465 acres from their father, Joseph, who lives across the road, and another 385 from other neighbors.

"It's hard to buy land close by,"





At the equipment shed between their houses, Henry, left, and John load a truck, above, with soybean seeds that will be driven to the field and planted that morning. In the field, left, they find that their planter needs to be lowered to put the seeds at the proper depth, so John makes the adjustment.

John explains. "Most good farm land is kept in the family of the owner." All the land that John and Henry work is within 5 miles of their homes, however, and this saves both time and money.

There are about 200 active black farmers in Drew County—probably 30 percent of all the farmers in the county. Most of them grow what John and Henry grow—cotton and soybeans—and raise cattle. John says that farmers who "work good" have no trouble finding land to rent.

By "renting", John and Henry mean that they pay for the seed to be planted and three-quarters of the fertilizer and insecticide cost and provide all of the labor and machinery. The landowner pays for a fourth of the fertilizer and insecticide costs. In return, he gets a fourth of the gross revenue from the crop.

In a typical year, John and Henry will plant 550 acres to soybeans and 300 acres to cotton.

WORK AS A TEAM

Not only do John and Henry live beside each other and plan all their farm work together, but when they get right down to working with machinery in the field, they couldn't be better coordinated if they were attached by wires. "We've been working together so long," John says, "we always know what the other is going to do."

What they are "doing" in the spring is breaking up the soil for planting. They attach low, wide steel implements—frames with pie-shaped disks or chisels protruding below—onto the back of their shiny $30,000 tractors and pull away from their equipment shed onto the country dirt roads. The sharp "bite" of the implement is suspended above the road surface so that it won't start digging until the farmer lets it down in the field.

It's a mini-parade when John and Henry start moving their machinery to a field. The implements take up most of the road; so, like most farmers with implements, the brothers stay away from heavily travelled roads as much as possible.

In the field, John and Henry first cut open the soil. With 800-plus acres, that takes weeks, assuming there will be some bad weather. Then they "hip" the soil into dirt ridges a foot high and a foot wide, so that the fields look like huge washboards. It is on these ridges that John and Henry later plant their cotton or soybean seeds . . . eight rows at a time by machine.

Also in the spring, the cows are calving; so they must be checked every day for difficulties. John grazes 25 beef cows (and their calves), Henry, 20, and their

Above, as the final stage of ground preparation before planting, Arthur Butler, the hired man, flattens the tops of long dirt ridges so they can better receive the seed and handle rainwater properly.

Below, the Sims cows are checked every morning—every evening, too, if they are with calf. Henry sells a dozen feeder calves a year. So does John. Joseph sells about a half dozen.

father, Joseph, 15, on 140 acres of pasture. Each newborn calf must be inoculated against disease by a veterinarian.

By the end of May, the Sims' cotton is all planted. So John and Henry turn to planting soybeans, whenever it isn't raining.

The summer is spent fighting weeds, either with herbicide sprays or with cultivator implements with sharp blades spaced to cut out the unwanted plants and leave the good crops alone. Cultivating alone occupies 2 days a week.

Then there are the insects. John and Henry pay Cooperative Extension Service scouts $1.50 an acre to check out their cotton fields once or twice a week for signs that the bad insects are going to get out of control. John says the scouts really earn their money because they cut down on the amount of pesticides needed—the scout reports permit the Sims family to spray only when it's needed rather than on a set schedule.

Still, pesticides must be applied 5 to 9 times a summer—by airplane. John and Henry don't have time to apply the pesticides from the ground. Besides, they might miss the best time to spray in one field while they were still spraying in another.

Chemicals—fertilizers, herbidides, insecticides—are the most expensive single item in the Sims' operation. John and Henry go to a bank in town in the spring and borrow about $26,000 so that they can buy chemicals through the year. Then, when the cotton is harvested and sold, they repay the bank. "The cotton hasn't failed us yet," John says.

With 30 acres of hay, John and Henry are busy in the summer, too, cutting and baling some 3,000 bales of hay. That's hot, hard work, but the hay keeps the cattle fed through the winter.

In the fall, it's time for all the hard work to pay off. It is time for the cotton and soybeans to be harvested. This is when John, Jr.,

11, and his brother, Vincent, 7, get most involved in the operation. They love to stamp down the cotton in the big wagons that follow the cotton-picking machines. This helps compact the fluffy stuff so that each wagon can hold more when it is hauled to Tillar.

Cotton harvesting on the Sims' land starts in October and continues for 2 months. Late in October, the Sims brothers add soybean harvesting to their work, and just keep going until its done.

NIGHT WORK

Usually, the brothers work in the field until dark, arriving home at what Verna calls "dark: 30"—half an hour after darkness sets in. But in the fall, they just keep harvesting into the night because every hour of good weather is important. If it rains, the cotton is harder to harvest, and soybeans may be pounded to the ground and lost because the combine can't pick them up. In any case, rain can damage the quality of both crops, lowering the prices offered the growers.

John and Henry use two self-propelled cotton pickers worth $50,000 each, six cotton trailers, and a $30,000 combine to harvest beans.

Also, in the fall, John and Henry truck their 6-month-old beef calves to a cattle auction in Warren, 30 miles away, where they will be sold to the highest bidder. John sells a dozen feeder calves a year, Henry another dozen, and Joseph, 6 or 8. Each keeps a couple to be fed at home until they are large enough to be slaughtered for the family meals. "It helps on the food bill," Verna says. "I don't even know the price of meat in the store anymore."

Why not grow all cotton or all soybeans? Why bother with cattle at all? For one thing, some land is better for one crop than the other, John explains. Cotton needs a longer growing season so the Sims like to plant it on high ground that drains well and dries faster so thay can plant earlier. If lower ground remains wet longer, the soybeans can be planted later and still provide a good crop.

Equally important are prices. John continues, "If it's a real bad cotton year, beans might be good. Cows help, too, if things get a little tight."

What is a bad cotton year? That is a year when either the weather or the insects damage or destroy their crops, or a year when the cost of production is so high and the prices so low that they can't make a profit. A farmer plants more than one crop, just in case.

Management decisions can determine whether a farmer survives. Knowing this, John and Henry keep close records. They know what it costs to grow cotton and soybeans each year—altogether and per acre. They compare each year's cost with costs in previous years.

"You can buy a lot more chemicals than you really need," John explains. "If that last pound of fertilizer you put down doesn't produce more cash from increased production than that pound cost, then you have to question putting the last pound down.

"You can't put too much into equipment either. Last year things were tight and people couldn't

Sims Brothers Partnership Income and Expenses, 1978

Income	
Sale of cotton	$70,685
Sale of grain	63,749
Patronage dividends (from cooperative)	2,046
Ag program payments	
Henry	230
John	927
Farmers Butane gas tax refund	365
Total	$138,002

Income	$138,002
Expenses and Depreciation	89,524
Net profit (divided between 2 families)	$ 48,478

Expenses	
Hired labor (not full time)	$ 5,875
Repairs, maintenance	13,871
Interest	1,258
Feed purchased	988
Seeds, plants purchased	7,406
Fertilizers, lime, chemicals	25,887
Machine hire (airplanes)	3,715
Supplies purchased	148
Vet fees	350
Gasoline, fuel, oil	9,779
Taxes, Social Security	1,092
Insurance	2,063
Utilities	516
Subscriptions and dues	79
Accounting	390
Cotton scouts	406
License	187
Office supply	28
Total expenses	$74,038
Depreciation	15,486
	$89,524

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pay off their machinery debts."

You can farm too much land, their father, Joseph, notes. He says there was a time when he, John, and Henry worked 1,300 acres of farmland, hiring some extra help when needed. That was when he was younger and could do twice as much work (now he plows "only" 100 acres a year). But if you have to hire more labor or buy more machinery to work that additional land, then you have to decide whether it is worth the extra cost.

JOSEPH STARTED FARM

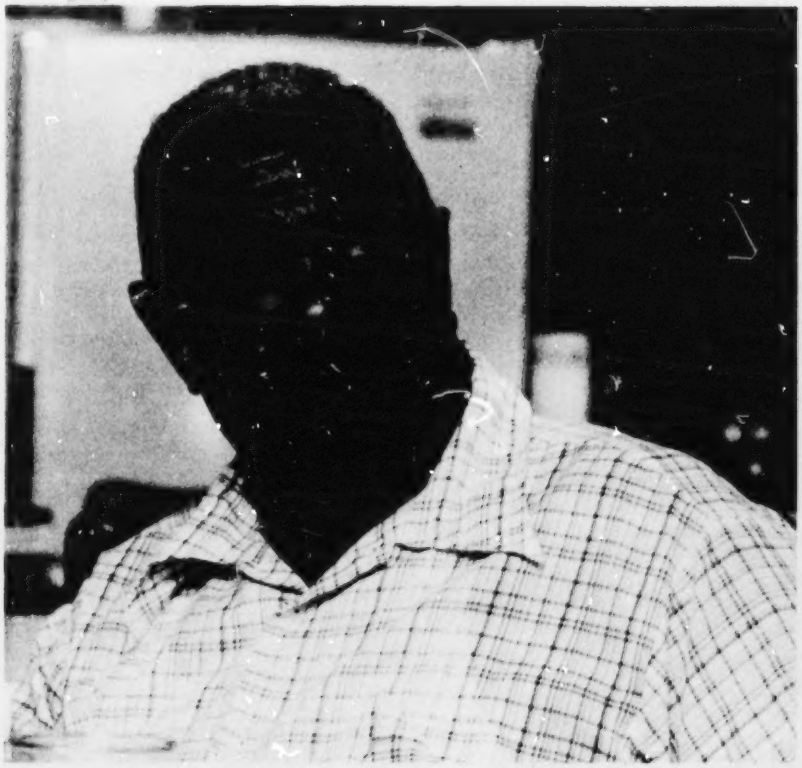
It was Joseph, whose grandparents were slaves in South Carolina, who accumulated the basic land holding that John and Henry work. He started farming back in the twenties. His own father advised him against owning land . . . said it might be taken away from him to pay bills or for some other reason. But a man in town advised Joseph to buy land, so he did. "The man was right," Joseph recalls.

Joseph bought his first land in 1940—14 acres for $100.

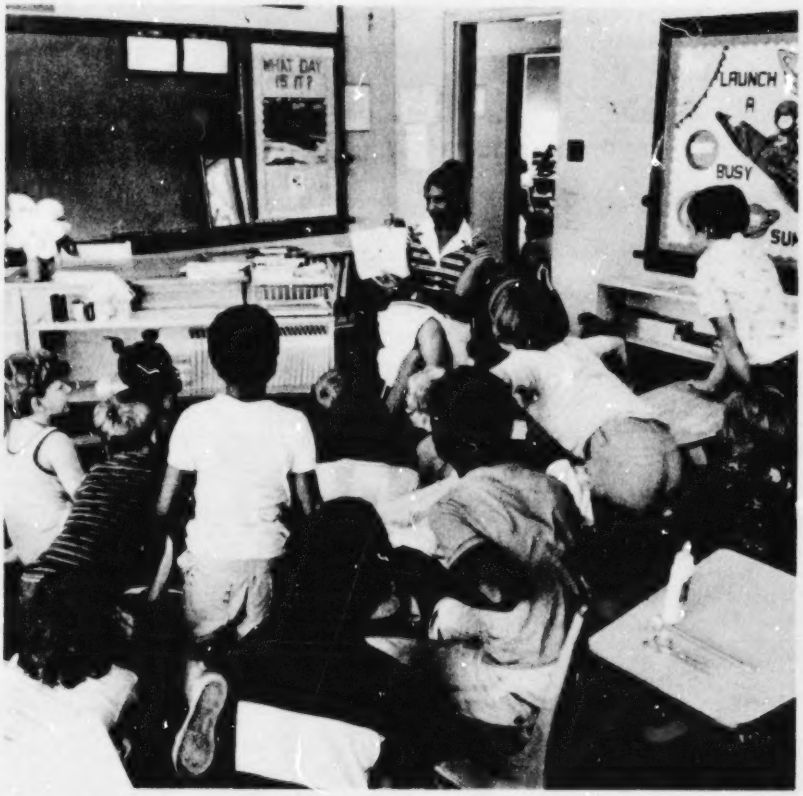
"Every time after that, when I had a chance, I bought a little land," he recalls. "There were times I had to borrow the money. There were times when I was lucky enough to have the cash (I always try to keep a nickel or two). The man said that when a bargain comes along, then you must even borrow to buy the land."

Joseph and his wife, Fannie, had gone into farming for themselves in 1928. At the same time, Joseph worked for others for 50 cents to a dollar a day to support his family. There were three children then; there are 10 now.

There were hard times. Joseph would hire an old man to plow for him at 50 cents a day, while he himself cut wood for $1 a day. He remembers taking a load of wood into town and selling it for $2 so



Joseph Sims, 72, and his wife Fannie, were visited by more than 30 grandchildren and great-grandchildren when they celebrated their 50th Wedding Anniversary in 1975. Though their modern home is air-conditioned, Fannie likes to step out into the summer heat and her garden, where she grows sweet corn, tomatoes, potatoes, peas, lettuce, and onions on a little less than a half acre.



Her third grade students at W.C. Whaley Elementary School mean a lot to Verna Sims, John's wife. After their play at lunch, she cools them down with story-telling, showing them the illustrations as she goes along.

that he could buy a pair of shoes for a son to go to school.

That first year Joseph made what he considered a pretty good crop. A year later, he had saved enough money to buy a mule. In another year, he bought a second mule, but it took him until 1937—7 years—to finish paying for it because of the Depression.

"I thought about quitting in 1932," Joseph recalls. But his father-in-law talked him out of it. "There are good years and bad," John philosophizes, "Some are better than others."

Eight of Joseph and Fannie's children left the farm when they became adults. Even Henry thought about leaving, spending three winters working in a northern automobile factory before joining John full time in farming in 1960.

All of the Sims' lives are tied closely to the land and their community. John and Henry serve on local boards and committees of U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies, national farmer organizations, and their church, the 16 Section Baptist Church.

Their wives are very active in the community. A graduate of the University of Arkansas, Verna teaches third grade in Monticello 10 months of the year. She's also director of Bible School in the summer. But beyond that, Verna also is a leader in 4-H, a national youth program of the Cooperative Extension Service, and a Sunday School teacher. Ozea Lee, Henry's wife, works 20 hours a week as an aide in the Cooperative Extension Service, helping her neighbors learn to manage their homes.

Sports have always played a role in their lives. Ozea Lee plays tennis. She and Henry met while roller skating. Since both John and Verna played basketball in high school, they both join their

A 6-foot-3 former high school basketball player, John Sims likes to shoot baskets in the driveway with his sons, John Jr., 11, and Vincent, 7, when the youngsters aren't tearing around on their motorbikes.

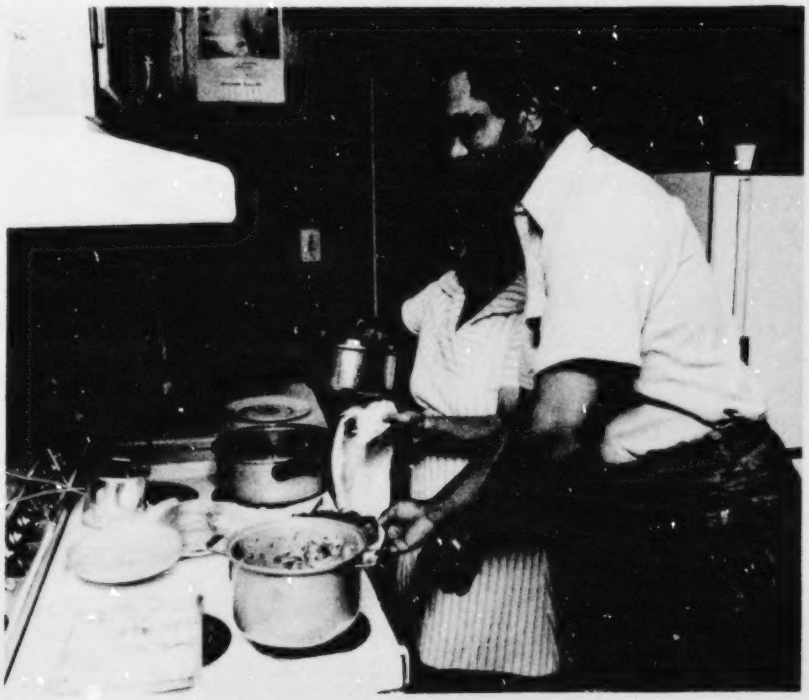
sons in shooting baskets in their driveway at home, and also attend college basketball games together.

Vacations are scarce. Once John and Verna drove to Houston to see a baseball game in the Astrodome. Both couples entertain and go out to dinner and the movies occasionally.

Fannie and Verna find additional enjoyment working in their large vegetable gardens. They like the open spaces and the quietness of their lives

But many of their neighbors have left farming. John and Henry are working some of their land; Joseph bought some of it. "Some of them didn't manage well," John says, "and some others that I thought were doing pretty well chose to go the factories because they could make more money there than they could farming . . . at least for the amount of work they put into it." "It's the people who really work at farming who will make a success of it, Verna observes. "Farming is not a hit or miss deal," she concludes. "It's really work."

Ozea Lee Sims, Henry's wife, below, right, visits 33 families twice a month as an aide with the Cooperative Extension Service, to help the families learn to manage their homes. She delves into such fields as food preservation, crafts, upholstery, and money management. Above, she and Margaret Reverand, left, enjoy a light moment. Ozea Lee demonstrates how to wear an "Oklahoma scarf," an inexpensive yet dressy item that can be made at home.



Every noon, John and Henry visit their mother for lunch. That's cabbage greens John is tending. Also on the menu that day: barbecued pork, venison, beefsteak, lettuce and tomato salad, rolls, cornbread, potato salad, peas and boiled potatoes.

Approaching three 80-acre fields of good Mississippi Delta land, John Sims might reflect on the changes in stewardship of that land. In the 1930s, the Government bought large holdings of Mississippi Delta land, much of it denuded of forests and worthless to its owners. Then the Government gave it or resold it under very favorable terms to poor farmers. "Eighty acres and a mule," some called the program. This particular land was owned and worked by three such farmers until they retired and Joseph Sims bought it. Thus, one farmer who was so poor himself in the 1930s that it took him 7 years to pay for a mule, now owns all three former farms. John and Henry plant both cotton and soybeans there now.

CAN IT STILL BE DONE?

Asked if he thought city young people should be encouraged to get into farming, a black farmer who wished to remain unidentified was blunt. "Don't even think about getting into it," he said. "Who's going to invest $500,000 in a kid? That's $300,000 to $400,000 for land and $100,000 for equipment. It's impossible to get into farming unless you inherit it."

But he relented after some thought. He talked about the need to gain experience. "The basic part about agriculture you have to learn by doing," he said. "A lot of youngsters go to work for someone and come to be good overseers. They establish credit. A man comes to like you, then he lends to you. That's still happening."

The Sims family echoed his advice. "You've gotta have money and you've gotta know how to farm," Joseph Sims said. "It would be kind of hard just to come in and get backing. I helped my sons until they could make it on their own."

His son John added. "A young man would have to get a job on a farm—get a start. And then, if he did good, he could apply for a Government loan. He could build up from there. It would be hard."

"He'd have to have awful strong determination," Wilbur Minisee said.

Is it necessary to buy land? John Sims says, "You could get into farming just renting. If a farmer works good, there is no trouble in finding land to rent."

Is there a future for black farmers?

John Sims said, "I think the ones who have held on will continue."

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Behind the Numbers – A Hypothetical Couple

Who is behind the statistic that 56 percent of American black farmers sell less than $2,500 worth of farm products a year?

Let's call him John Smith, although that is not his real name. He's 55 and married. The children have moved out and are still living in the area. But they're not farmers. They work in a textile mill in a town of 40,000 people. So does their father.

John considers himself a farmer, and is counted as one by the Census Bureau because he sells more than $1,000 worth of farm products a year and he manages his own place.

Actually, John sells only $1,900 worth of farm products a year. Although he owns 15 acres of land, he grows only tobacco, changing his planting area each year. The government decides how many acres of tobacco may be grown each year, and how many pounds of tobacco may be marketed. This is divided among farms based on the farms' past history of producing tobacco. John's share of the national allotment and quota in 1978 was three-quarters of an acre and 1,300 pounds.

Obviously, John couldn't survive on that $1,900 he gets from farming. Even with the $8,000 he earns each year in the mill, he doesn't earn much.

But, after all, there are just him and his wife (and a dog) to support in that well-kept, two-bedroom house by the side of a paved road.

They grow their own vegetables. And their pork is provided by an arrangement with John's brother and father just down the road. Together, the three men grow a few hogs each year at John's father's place . . . just enough to feed their families.

John was born just down the road. Mary, the fictional name of his wife, was born less than 10 miles away. They met at the Baptist church. Mostly, they tend to their own business, not getting involved in community affairs, although John used to play baseball when there was a black baseball team in the county.

John enjoys being a farmer. Growing tobacco is no easy task, though. There's sowing tobacco plant beds in the winter, than transplanting the young plants from a bed to the field in the spring . . . a field that he's plowed, harrowed (cut the soil into finer pieces), and fertilized. Children, wives, brothers, and dads help with the planting. Then John goes through the field two or three times with a cultivator to cut back the weeds and grasses. He tops all the plants to make leaves fill out and weigh more, and then goes through and sprays with a chemical to control unwanted suckers. Then, or course, there's the harvest in late summer—the pulling of leaves, then tying them to sticks and hanging them in a barn to dry.

John has all the tools he needs: a small 25-year-old tractor to pull the plow, a harrow and a cultivator, a tobacco planter and a tying machine.

Farming and holding a job in town creates a lot of work for John. But his home has indoor plumbing, hot and cold water, and is surrounded by the flowers that Mary plants. He keeps a 16-year-old Ford in tiptop condition.

With Mary, John is looking forward to retirement on Social Security from his job in town so he can spend more time on the farm.

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